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## The Evangelists' Editorial Efforts; Matthean and Lukan Theology vis-a-vis a Few, Unique Parables

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*The Evangelists' Editorial Efforts; Matthean and Lukan Theology vis-à-vis a Few,  
Unique Parables*  
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Departmental Distinction Paper for Religious Studies  
Spring 2017

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## Introduction

As an early Church Father and apologist in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Irenaeus contributed greatly to discourse on Christian theology, scripture, and tradition. However Irenaeus could not have been further from the truth when he exclaimed, “The parables will receive a like interpretation from all!”<sup>1</sup> Had his prediction proven to be true, perhaps there would not be much to say about the parables in the Christian Gospels. Yet a single, universally accepted interpretation of any one parable did not exist during Jesus’ earthly ministry, and certainly does not exist today.

Why, then, does Jesus speak in parables? Why would a religious teacher utilize an esoteric form of teaching that would serve to confuse his followers indefinitely? If parables really are “the hallmark of Jesus’ teaching,” why do they seem to be presented in code?<sup>2</sup> And most importantly, what do the parables reveal about the Gospels authors’ personal theology?

The crux of this paper is to demonstrate how Luke and Matthew utilize a few unique parables to propagate their own religious claims. By ‘unique,’ I mean a saying that has no parallels in other New Testament Gospels, but is instead specific to a particular evangelist –e.g. *The Growing Seed* in Mark.<sup>3</sup> In addition to uniqueness, and with the exception of one story in Matthew’s Gospel, I choose parables that receive a pink or red authenticity rating from the Jesus Seminar. Initially organized by Robert Funk in 1985, the Jesus Seminar published its findings about the “Sayings of Jesus” in

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<sup>1</sup> David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 4:26-29; I use The New Revised Standard Version of the Christian Bible for all Scriptural citations unless noted otherwise.

*The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. In assessing the authenticity of Jesus' parables, the Jesus Seminar used different colored stones to designate how authentic the group believed the saying is. A red vote indicates that the saying is likely to be authentic; a pink vote, somewhat likely to be authentic; a gray vote, somewhat unlikely; and a black vote, unlikely. The parables I examine meet two important criterions: 1) the parable must be unique to one gospel author and 2) it must be *generally* agreed upon as relatively authentic to the historical Jesus. Based on these qualities, I examine the following: *The Prodigal Son*, *The Good Samaritan*, and *The Unjust Steward* in Luke's Gospel; and *The Unmerciful Servant*, *The Sheep and the Goats*, and *The Laborers in the Vineyard* in Matthew's Gospel.

I use the authenticity rating from the particular sub-group of scholars at the Jesus Seminar because it is the result of diligent research and scrutiny. However, I do not attempt to assign a spiritual-oriented truth-value to any one parable. My stance approaches each parable in terms of what it contributes to an evangelist's personal theology, not in the hopes of refiguring the historical Jesus or to assert that one theology is superior to another. I am primarily dealing with how Luke and Matthew use their parables, and how to understand their parables in the form that we have them in. The unique parables in Matthew and Luke present different understandings of Jesus' teachings; I hope to make lucid how the authors use certain parables to evidence their own religious claims. I use relatively likely and likely authentic parables –i.e., pink and red– to show that even the parables that some scholars attribute to the historical Jesus might be too edited/redacted/unique to be accredited to him with certainty.

Before turning to the parables in Luke and Matthew, it is pertinent to understand the Jewish origins of Jesus' teaching style. A basic knowledge of the parables' historical context, origins, and usages is vital to a proper interpretation of Jesus' sayings. The historical Jesus left "neither a physical body nor a body of writing."<sup>4</sup> Granted, even if Jesus had been literate –and there is little evidence to suggest this claim besides Luke Chapter 4–, Irenaeus' notion of interpretational solidarity would still be false. In reality, the historical Jesus is an abstract construct that scholars have created by applying "historical-critical methods to ancient sources."<sup>5</sup> There is a great deal of controversy surrounding the importance of the historical Jesus in regards to how we should interpret his sayings. Some scholars –like Bernard Brandon Scott– insist that knowing the historical Jesus is crucial for parable interpretation, whilst others –such as John Dominic Crossan– examine Jesus, "not in the sense of his religion, faith, or self-understanding, but in the sense of [his] language."<sup>6</sup> In both scholastic camps, however, there is a unanimous agreement about an important fact: the historical Jesus was indeed Jewish. There are significant commonalities and a strong connection between many of Jesus' messages (vis-à-vis the Gospels) and rabbinic-Pharisaic Judaism.<sup>7</sup>

The historical Jesus spoke in parables because this was the predominant form of teaching in Judaism. The Jewish origins behind the Christian parables are often dismissed or understated –to the detriment of Christianity, in my opinion. I argue that the Jewish context in which Jesus' sayings arise should be a prerequisite for examining his sayings and rhetoric. In the Jewish *Mashals*, for example, the stories are often short in

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<sup>4</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> John P. Meier, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (Vol. 5. New Haven: Yale UP, 2016), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Brad Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI. 2012), 3.

length and usually detach themselves from specific, named people or places; through indirect means, a *mashal* will often incorporate an allusive message.<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew term *mashal*, usually translated as ‘parabolē’ in Greek, means, “to represent,” “to be like,” and “is like.”<sup>9</sup> The word covers a wider literary category than the English term “parable”; and broadly speaking, the Christian notion of “parable” is a subset of *mashal*. The Jewish *Mashals* are often addressed to a life situation and/or to a Scriptural text’s interpretation, and are usually not subtle in the way they express an ideology. The *mashals* are didactically oriented, and their meanings were often clear to their original audiences.<sup>10</sup> Jesus’ parables tend to reflect this Jewish, story-telling style and tradition. Like some of the NT sayings, the rabbinic parables interpret paradoxes in Scripture and offer insight into life situations. However, the evangelists often use the parables for different purposes; that is to say, although Jesus’ teaching style is essentially Jewish, his followers—in their subsequent interpretations—alter the traditional *Mashal* considerably.

Inherently tied to the Jewish *Mashals* are the Jewish *Nimshals*. The term *nimshal* is best understood as an explanation of the *mashal*, but it is not regarded as less important. In some instances, the *nimshal* has priority—chronologically and ontologically—over the *mashal* proper.<sup>11</sup> The Jewish *Nimshals* are often introduced with “likewise” (in Hebrew, “kakh”), and usually end with a citation from the Torah. Although the audience members are usually privy to the meanings in the *mashal*, the *nimshal* often provides a new, revised meaning to the story.<sup>12</sup> The following *mashal*,

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<sup>8</sup> David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

taken from a Jewish Midrash, is an example of a rabbinic parable as a commentary on Jewish scripture:

Rabbi Tanhum ben Hanilai said... “To what may this be compared? To a physician who went to see two sick people, one whose life was not in danger and the other who was near death. The physician said to the one whose life was not threatened: ‘You should not eat such and such things!’ and in the case of the other man near death, he said to the people: ‘Give him whatever he wants to eat!’”<sup>13</sup>

This particular *mashal* serves to teach the audience about why God imposes dietary restrictions on the Israelites.<sup>14</sup> The following *nimshal* is the accompaniment to the previous *mashal*:

So it is with the people of the world who are not chosen for life in the world to come: ‘Every creature that lives and moves shall be food for you...’ But to Israelites, who are there to live in the Garden Eden: ‘These are the living things which you may eat among all the beasts that are on earth’<sup>15</sup>

Like Jesus’ earliest followers, a Jewish audience might be left to ponder the meaning of a *mashal* with or without a *nimshal*. Thus, the Jewishness of the parables is evident in Jesus’ style of teaching as well as in the evangelists’ understanding of his teaching.

In both the Jewish and the Christian oral traditions, the role of the audience is significant. The members of the audience, as the recipients of parables, should catch on to the speaker’s understanding –especially when the understanding is complex and subtle. For this reason, a brief statement of the listener’s response is sometimes included in both Christian and Jewish Scriptures. Also consistent in both traditions is the idea that the audience must think through or try to ‘figure out’ a parable. Grasping the context of the

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<sup>13</sup> Thoma, Clemens, and Michael Wyschogrod. "The Function of Figurative Speech." *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 140.

<sup>14</sup> Leviticus 11.

<sup>15</sup> Leviticus 11:2.

audience to which Jesus spoke is vital to interpreting what the parables reveal; as Amy-Jill Levine says, “If we get the context wrong, we’ll get Jesus wrong as well.”<sup>16</sup>

The parables sometimes criticize (and/or reflect) the official social order of the first century CE. There are parallels between these sayings and the Hellenistic-Roman intellectual tradition, and the authors’ use of gender roles at times mirrors the patriarchal tendencies of Roman culture and society.<sup>17</sup> It is important to remember that Jesus and his disciples taught a predominantly Jewish audience. All of the stories need to have made sense in their first-century, second Temple Jewish context, which is to say that the parables were not told in a “literary, cultural, social, and historical vacuum.”<sup>18</sup> For instance, when Jesus is referred to as “the Son of man” –a claim made over 80 times in the NT Gospels– the audience would have already been familiar with the phrase. The audience members would naturally assign their own preexisting, Jewish conceptions of the idea of “the Son of man” to Jesus. The evangelists’ interpretation of the phrase, however, differs substantially from the traditional Jewish version at times. The title “the Son of man” would remind the audience of one with “dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and language should serve him,”<sup>19</sup> not a man who “must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.”<sup>20</sup> These kinds of alterations are part of what makes Jesus’ parables so radical, subversive, and memorable.

How should we begin to understand the parables? Modern research on the parables begins in 1886 with Adolph Jülicher’s *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, and since then,

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<sup>16</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?*, 57-62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 66.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel 7:13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Mark 8:31.

academic discourse on parable interpretation has seen many different strands of thought. There are competing philosophies about how to understand the term “parable” itself. For instance, C.H. Dodd believes there are only 32 parables, while Jülicher cites 53; Bernard Brandon Scott observes only 29 parables, but for Joachim Jeremias there are clearly 41.<sup>21</sup> Thus, even amongst the most premiere academics, there is little consensus about what constitutes a parable. However, as a starting block, Dodd marks an important distinction: a parable always “presents one single point of comparison,” regardless of whether or not it resembles a story, similitude, or metaphor.<sup>22</sup> The idea that parables act as points of comparison is helpful because, throughout Jesus’ sayings, “a comparison is made between God’s kingdoms, actions, or expectations and something in this world, real or imagined.”<sup>23</sup> Semantically speaking, the connotations associated with the word “parable” refer to something “cast-aside.”<sup>24</sup> However, it is better to understand parables in the context of a narrative framework, rather than to try and pinpoint it to a specific literary category.

Especially with the unique parables, I posit that each story should be understood within the situational context of the gospel in which it is presented. That is to say, depending on how it is being used, a parable may act as a figure of speech, a metaphor, a similitude, a narrative, a story, or an event. My definition is purposely vague because there is no fixed set of qualifications that each and every saying meets. What may be true of some of the parables is decisively false of others; therefore, a broad, inclusive definition of parables is preferable to more austere ones. In the oral tradition in which

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<sup>21</sup> Meier, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 3.

parables were composed, the words had to be memorable thoughts.<sup>25</sup> If the parables were not memorable, the chain of communication would have been broken long before their incorporation into the evangelists' Gospels. To ensure memorization, many parables use sound devices –e.g., onomatopoeia, alliteration, consonance, assonance, etc.– that, as Hedrick says, enforce “the rhythm of the narrative.”<sup>26</sup>

The parables cannot be interpreted properly through the lens of allegory alone. Though there is emblematic language in the stories, there's a problem in reducing the parables to one specific literary genre and hermeneutic. Allegorizing the parables too quickly may equate to assigning a foreign interpretation to author's original intent. Many early apologists and exegetes –such as Augustine, Tertullian, Jerome, and Origen- tend to allegorize the parables, and in doing so, sometimes inadvertently re-appropriate the author's original intentions.<sup>27</sup> It is in response to this problem that Jülicher argues the historical Jesus never used allegory because the idea of allegory is fundamentally opposed “to the simple parables of Jesus with their one point of comparison.”<sup>28</sup> Some of the parables, however, do contain a significant –at times, *sotto voce*– metaphor that pervades throughout the story. In some cases, then, an allegorical interpretation is a necessary component of a more comprehensive understanding. I maintain that an allegorical reading –used as a hermeneutical tool in a larger exegesis– can give insight into the personal theologies of the author's (in particular, that of Matthew). Therefore,

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<sup>25</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Polebridge Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Christian R. Davis, *Structural Analysis of Jesus' Narrative Parables: A Conservative Approach* (Grace Theological Seminary, 1988), 191.

<sup>28</sup> Meier, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*, 85.

allegorizing the parables will be useful only insofar as what it helps to reveal about Luke and Matthew as authors/editors.

## Luke's Parables

The broader narrative in Luke's Gospel has certain characteristics that have implications for how we understand the parables therein. For my purposes, Luke's Gospel is understood as a holistic narrative that the author crafts in order to advance his own theological schema (which may or may not necessarily be related to that of the historical Jesus). Especially in the Lukan parables, special attention is given to the sequential ordering of events because the stories often draw on their literary contexts for meaning.<sup>29</sup> The author's particular chronological succession pre-disposes the reader/audience to think certain ways about themes, characters, and plots in his parables. At times, Luke provides narrative introductions to Jesus' sayings; this is a distinctive Lukan quality that is not shared amongst other Synoptic authors.<sup>30</sup> In regards to structure, Luke's Gospel preserves Q's literary format more than Matthew's does, and Luke also utilizes and adds onto Markan material.<sup>31</sup>

In his unique parables, Luke posits his own conceptions of money, compassion, repentance, forgiveness, and perceptions of Torah. Not surprisingly, these themes and their corollaries reoccur consistently in Luke's version of Jesus. My argument is how the parables of *The Prodigal Son*, *The Good Samaritan*, and *The Unjust Steward* demonstrate and propagate the author's personal theology. From the beginning of his gospel, it is evident that Luke wishes to establish a relationship with his readers/audience, and that there is a particular way in which we should understand his claims:

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<sup>29</sup> Garwood P. Anderson, "Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost: Luke's Restoration of an Enigmatic Parable Tradition," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2008): 743.

<sup>30</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> In terms of synoptic relations, I ascribe to B.H. Streeter's two-source hypothesis because it helps account for the material in Luke and Matthew that is not found in Mark's Gospel; see Streeter, Burnett Hillman. "The Four Gospels, a Study of Origins." Revised 4th Impression: (*St. Martin's Street, London*. MacMillan and Co., 1930).

I [the author of Luke] too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.<sup>32</sup>

Luke wishes to instruct his readers and audience about how to understand Jesus and his earthly ministry. He recognizes that his “account” is his own particular rendition of events, and that it is given for Theophilus’ spiritual development (so that he “may know the truth”). We can discern two important facts from the passage: 1) Luke’s gospel is the product of the author’s own subsequent interpretation of events and 2) the Gospel’s didactic orientation is explicitly established from the beginning. But what does this mean for the reader?

Luke’s Gospel –i.e., the evangelist’s version of Jesus’ teachings, life, and death– is admittedly subjective and constructed for teaching purposes. Since Jesus is the most authoritative figure in the New Testament, it is no surprise that Luke attributes particular sayings to him in order to give his Gospel credence and reverence –regardless if the historical Jesus actually uttered the phrase or not. It follows, then, that the unique Lukan parables are instances in which Luke’s theology is posited directly through the character of Jesus. The Lukan Jesus reveals the author’s most essential, personal beliefs. I do not assess whether or not Luke’s claims are faithful to those of the historical Jesus; rather, I believe that Luke uses *The Good Samaritan*, *The Prodigal Son*, and *The Unjust Steward* as the apexes for his own theology.

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<sup>32</sup> Lk. 1:3-4.

## The Good Samaritan

Before the parable of *The Good Samaritan*, Luke narrates:

Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it’<sup>33</sup>

The introduction is markedly Lukan as well as a preface for the narrative-parable’s literary content. From 10:23, it is evident that Luke is chiefly concerned with his audience’s perception; that is, how his readers/audience “hear” and “see” the “things about which [they] have been instructed” (Lk. 1:3-4). The parable receives a red vote – the highest level of historical authenticity– from the Jesus Seminar:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer, do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do like-wise.”<sup>34</sup>

The parable of *The Good Samaritan* is not found in any other gospel. In fact there is a notable absence of Samaritans in Mark, and there is even a prohibition against going

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<sup>33</sup> Lk. 10:23

<sup>34</sup> Lk. 10:30-37

into Samaria in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 10:5). The parable's uniqueness along with the editorial redactions suggest that Luke uses the narrative to advance certain parts of his own theological agenda.<sup>35</sup> The Jesus Seminar concludes that Luke produces Peter's question about neighbor in 10:29 as a transition into the parable, and that 10:36-37 is Luke's creation as well.<sup>36</sup>

The specific language in the parable serves to demonstrate Luke's theological and social assertions, especially for his claims concerning compassion and proper perception of Torah. In other words, compassionate action and spiritual perception are intimately connected in *The Good Samaritan* and throughout Luke's gospel. John Donahue, for instance, believes the parable is the "paradigm of the compassionate vision," and he also notes other scenes in Luke's gospel that juxtapose 'seeing' with 'compassion': including Luke 7:13 (Jesus *sees* a woman burying her son and has *compassion*), 15:20 (a father *sees* his son return and has *compassion* for him), and 1:76-78 (a hymn of the infancy narrative).<sup>37</sup> As a hermeneutical tool, the actantial model analyzes the actions (i.e., the verbs) in a parable and can highlight certain narrative patterns and themes that are not obvious initially.<sup>38</sup> The interpretational lens is useful in *The Good Samaritan* –and in the other unique parables– because the narrative includes action in the story itself, and seeks to provoke an action from the audience. For example, in a single verse (10:34): the Samaritan "went to him," "bandaged his wounds," "[poured] on oil," "put him on his animal," "brought him to an inn," and "took care of him." All of these actions are

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<sup>35</sup> Robert W. Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition: A Report of The Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1988), 30-31

<sup>36</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 31

<sup>37</sup> John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in The Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), 132.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, *Structural Analysis of Jesus' Narrative Parables*, 195

predicated on proper perception—a perception that both the priest and Levite do not have. Through the narrative’s specific verbs, Luke insists that proper perception yields ethical action. The parable is indeed a hero story, but not a super-hero story. Everyone is capable of performing the actions of the Samaritan, provided they “hear” and “see” correctly.

Luke’s discourse on the relationship between perception and ethical action is evident even before the unique parable. The modes of perception are emphasized earlier on Luke’s Gospel: Jesus “stood up to read,” was sent to recover “sight to the blind,” and claims, while “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him,” that “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:16-21). Luke’s literary emphasis on perception—evident in his specific language—is crucial to his theological views. Another example is Lk. 6:46-49 wherein the Lukan Jesus says that the insiders—those who are genuine disciples in his ministry—are those who both “hear” and “act” on the word of God. Luke’s ideal Christian, then, is hinted at prior to the parable: one has the ability to see and hear properly, and, as a consequence of this proper perception, to “act” with compassion. The parable’s conclusion—“Go and do likewise”—is a two-fold command: it is a call to be like the Samaritan in terms of perception and action, and also to expand one’s understanding outside the normative socio-religious boundaries.

In addition to the parable’s language, *The Good Samaritan*’s characters exemplify distinctly Lukan claims. As the first character in the parable, the lawyer plays a negative role. Like the Jewish congregation in Luke 4:16-30, the lawyer knows the word of God but is too blinded by his own self-interest to perceive what it means to fulfill it. The Greek term for “lawyer” is “nomikos,” and the word is found 7 times in Luke’s gospel,

never in Mark's, and only once in Matthew's.<sup>39</sup> Luke's rhetorical question in 10:26 is directed to both the lawyer and his Jewish audience: "What is written in the law? How do you read?" Notice how the Lukan Jesus does not ask, "*What* do you read?" which would demand a more content-based response from the lawyer and audience. Luke incorporates the lawyer's question and Jesus' affirmation of the commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor (Dt. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18) to confirm that the objective content of the old law remains valid.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Luke's emphasis on teaching established in his Gospel's opening verses is continued through *The Good Samaritan's* opening question. Luke's editorial effort allows him to incorporate the parable into his gospel narrative; and the lawyer's question –derived from Mark 12:28-31– allows the author to initiate the narrative's plot. Luke's redactional efforts are also apparent in 10:26 because he explicitly excludes the word "commandment" (this omission is consistent throughout his Gospel).<sup>41</sup>

The role of the parable's victim (the robbed man) continues to vex many exegetes. The assumption would be made by the audience that the "half-dead" man is Jewish; however, the robbed man becomes truly anonymous when he is stripped of his clothing.<sup>42</sup> Upon hearing the nakedness of the victim, Luke's audience would recall Jesus' exhortation about loving one's enemies in Lk. 6:29 –the only other instance before Lk. 10 which involved Jesus describing the robbery of a man's clothing in Lk. 6:27-35. I believe that the victim is actually the most miniscule character in the parable; his literary role is important insofar as it helps develop Lukan notions of compassion and perception.

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<sup>39</sup> Herman Hedrickx, *The Parables of Jesus; Studies in the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Chapman, 1986), 79.

<sup>40</sup> Juan Carlos Cevallos. "The Good Samaritan: A Second Reading Of The Law (Luke 10:25-37)," *Theological Educator* 56 (1997): 53.

<sup>41</sup> Hedrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 58.

Luke's most prominent rhetorical device in *The Good Samaritan* is irony, as it is a Samaritan (instead of a Jew) who perceives "the law" correctly. In the Second Temple Period, Jews and Samaritans shared the same, basic Torah, but were religiously and politically distinct.<sup>43</sup> Given the context of the Lukan Jesus' confirmation of the law in 16:28, the rhetorical question posed to the lawyer in 16:36 is really about who is more faithful to the Torah.<sup>44</sup> According to Alan Crown, the Samaritans in the first century CE believe that they are "the biblical Israel," the "true guardians of the law... which the Jews have corrupted."<sup>45</sup> By casting a Samaritan as the one who fulfills the law, Luke claims that compassionate actions are not restricted to the audience's particularly Jewish community, but are instead universal. Those who represent the most educated and the most righteous in religious law –that is, the priest and the Levite– are the characters that fail to enact it properly. Luke seeks to impress on his audience why it is that the religious elite fail, so that his audience can learn the kind of perception that causes compassion. Luke's version of compassion, then, hinges on proper and improper perception, and the priest and Levite exemplify the kind of improper perception that Luke contrasts with the Samaritan. As Hultgren says, "The distinction between the first two figures (the priest and the Levite) and the third (the Samaritan) is a matter of the heart and compassion, not of law and office."<sup>46</sup>

*The Good Samaritan* can also be interpreted as a precursor for Luke's book of Acts since the parable fits neatly into the context of Act's missionary activity. As the

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<sup>43</sup> Alan D. Crown, "Redating the Schism between the Judaeans and the Samaritans," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 82, (1991): 17

<sup>44</sup> J.I.H. McDonald, "The View from the Ditch — and Other Angles: Interpreting the Parable of the Good Samaritan," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49.01 (1996): 30

<sup>45</sup> Crown, "Redating the Schism between the Judaeans and the Samaritans": 18

<sup>46</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 96.

author of Acts, Luke is acutely aware of Samaria and the Samaritans; both in Acts 1:8 and 8:1-25, and with the proclamation, “Samaria had accepted the word of God” (Acts 8:14). In Luke 9:52-56, just before *The Good Samaritan* proper, Luke notes how the Samaritans did not receive Jesus “because his face was set towards Jerusalem.” The parable, then, acts as a literary transition for the Samaritans approval, an acceptance that ultimately culminates in the book of Acts.<sup>47</sup>

The parable’s literary context and the link between proper perception of Torah and compassion are essential in *The Good Samaritan*, and hence essential to Luke. Through his editorial decisions, it is clear that Luke is acutely aware of the parable’s position in his larger narrative. Although there are some elements –the irony of the Samaritan, for instance– that would shock his audience, the parable is relatively straightforward. I begin with *The Good Samaritan* because, compared to *The Prodigal Son* and *The Unjust Steward*, it is the most obvious in how it espouses Luke’s theology. As the author’s literary voice becomes louder and more specific, the role of Torah and notions of compassion, forgiveness, and repentance become increasingly nuanced. This is evident in the parable of *The Prodigal Son*, to which we now turn.

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<sup>47</sup> Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 75.

## The Prodigal Son

*The Prodigal Son* is prefaced by two other significant (but hardly unique) parables in Luke's Gospel: *The Lost Sheep* and *The Lost Coin* (Lk. 15:1-10). Although Luke's "unprecedented concern for the 'lost'"<sup>48</sup> is essential in the author's theology, the theme plays a minor role in my assessment of the narrative. The Jesus Seminar gives this unique narrative parable a pink authenticity designation:

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would have gladly filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out the robe – the best one- and put it on him; put a ringer on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 92.

<sup>49</sup> Lk. 15:11-32.

An analysis of *The Prodigal Son's* characters, actions, and historical/literary context is necessary to understand Luke's theology; and exegetes such as B.B. Scott, C.H. Dodd, and Arland Hultgren are especially versed in this parable. Like *The Good Samaritan* and *The Unjust Steward*, *The Prodigal Son* contains literary and rhetorical elements that are distinctly Lukan. The Jesus Seminar notes evidence for both "Lukan composition and editing" as well as the evangelist's "stylistic features" in the unique, narrative parable.<sup>50</sup> I argue that Luke presents the story in a way that challenges his audience and that the story posits his own conceptions of forgiveness, repentance, and compassion. Even though the parable receives a high mark of authenticity, it is noteworthy that some scholars argue –unconvincingly, in my opinion– that verses 25-32 are Luke's later addition and creation.<sup>51</sup> I treat the narrative as a whole, however.

There are residuals of the Jewish written and oral tradition in *The Prodigal Son's* literary organization. The opening lines of the story would immediately remind the audience of familial relations in the Torah: that is, of "Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam; Ishmael and Isaac, the sons of Abraham; Jacob and Esau, the sons of Isaac; and so on."<sup>52</sup> Luke strategically places the parable in a context in which angry sinners and tax collectors come to Jesus to complain. The literary setting, then, echoes that of Numbers 14:2-3 in which "all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron." The narrative also contains sentiments that harken back to ideas found in Malachi 1:2-3 and Jeremiah 3:19; the Lord says, "Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau" and "I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me." Jewish conceptions

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<sup>50</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 41.

<sup>51</sup> Hedrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 150.

<sup>52</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 9.

of family lineage and sibling favoritism are evident in *The Prodigal Son*; however, instead of continuing these conventional ideas, Luke uses the parable to subvert them.

*The Prodigal Son* contains on many aspects that would have appalled a Jewish audience in the first century CE, Second Temple context. For example, the younger son's request for an early inheritance and the father's acquiescence violate legal and social prescriptions outlined in Sirach 33:24-30 and Deuteronomy 21:15-17. Even more taboo is the younger son's apostasy; that is, after squandering all of his inheritance, he begins to feed pigs. Provisions against pork are essential in the Kashrut dietary laws,<sup>53</sup> and Luke extends the younger son's transgression even further in verse 16: "he would have gladly filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating." Hultgren explains, "To be fed from the 'pods' eaten by pigs –and therefore being envious of the pigs!– but being refused is even more degrading than the act of feeding the pigs itself."<sup>54</sup> Even with the varying interpretations of what constitutes "dissolute living," the dealings with the pigs might have been enough for the audience to condemn the younger son's actions – regardless of how exactly he squandered the inheritance. Although Amy-Jill Levine objects that there is no textual support for the younger son's apostasy (she maintains that the primary issue is starvation, not cleanliness<sup>55</sup>) many scholars believe that the younger son violates some aspect of the Jewish Torah and/or social standard.

The historical, Jewish context is important to Luke's theology precisely because *The Prodigal Son* cannot be reduced to a story of sibling favoritism. In fact, the prodigal son(s) is not even the protagonist: Lukan compassion and forgiveness are exemplified in

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<sup>53</sup> Deut. 4:18.

<sup>54</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 75.

<sup>55</sup> Amy-Jill Levine. "A Parable and its Baggage: What the Prodigal Son Story Doesn't Mean," *The Christian Century*, August 25, 2014.

the father's character. At the semantic level, the fact that the father cuts off the younger son's prepared apology in 15:22 indicates that the father is now in charge of the narrative proper. In first-century Semitic culture, the younger son's prepared speech might have been considered a requisite for absolution; that is, for a son who has "sinned" against his father. Furthermore, in classical story telling there are usually predictable protagonists and antagonists, but Luke overturns these routine expectations by making the father the literary vocal point.<sup>56</sup>

An obvious question, then, is why is the parable referred to as "the Prodigal Son" if the father is the protagonist of the narrative? I find that it is through the father's reactions to his sons that Luke is able to propagate his personal notions about compassion. The famous incipit –"There was a man who had two sons"– establishes an immediate sense of possession and dominion. There is more than a biological relation; the father essentially owns these boys and plays a significant role in determining their fates.<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that nobody forces the father to divide his "living" –here, the Greek term is basically synonymous with that of "property."<sup>58</sup> The father's decision to divide his property prematurely is peculiar, but essential. His over-the-top actions are indicative of "the divine compassion revealed in Jesus."<sup>59</sup> The obvious literary example of Lukan compassion is when, upon his son's return, the father, "filled with compassion," "ran" and "kissed" him.<sup>60</sup> The author extends this type of compassion through three important gestures: first, in verse 22, when the father clothes his son in the best robe;

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<sup>56</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 75.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>58</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 74.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>60</sup> The scene is incredibly similar to Genesis 33:4, when Esau "runs" to Jacob and "fell upon [Jacob's] neck."

second, when the father puts his ring –something normally passed on to the eldest brother at the time of the father’s death– on the younger son’s finger<sup>61</sup>; and third, when he asks to kill the fattest calf and then hosts a celebratory banquet (Lk. 15:24). In addition to being reminiscent of Genesis 41:42 –that is, “Removing his signet from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph’s hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen”– the father’s gestures are deliberately grandiose because they mirror Luke’s idea of divine compassion.

Luke’s theological position on forgiveness –a theme inherently linked with compassion– is also present in *The Prodigal Son*. The role of forgiveness is evident in the temperaments and actions of the two sons, and the father’s subsequent reactions to them. The familial relations in the Torah show that the terms “younger” and “elder” carry with them specific expectations and roles both legally and in story telling.<sup>62</sup> However, unlike the normative dramas in the Torah, the conflict between the brothers is never resolved (an additional indicator Luke’s primary focus is the father). It is significant that the elder son also receives his part of the father’s inheritance –per 15:12; the “property” is “divided between them.” The father has not cheated the elder son (barring the ring) of what would be his at the father’s death; in fact, the father explicitly notes in 15:31, “all that is [his] is [the elder son’s].” Yet it is equally true that the elder son is not initially invited to the banquet! He must ask the slaves “what is going on” when he hears the “music and dancing” (Lk. 15:25-26). Even after the father pleads with the elder son to enter the feast, he refuses. Unlike the father, the elder son is primarily concerned with his own merit and the law –in 15:29, he claims to have never disobeyed “[the father’s] command”– not with forgiveness. Similar to the contrast between the

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<sup>61</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 79.

<sup>62</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 78.

Samaritan and the priest, Luke draws important distinction between the two brothers. Inside the banquet is a younger son who has gotten away with everything, and is restored; and outside is an elder brother with all the property, and all the power, who is angry.<sup>63</sup> This notable discrepancy in the brother's attitudes is indeed the result of the father's actions; but the father's capacity to forgive is not determined by his sons' characters or actions, but by his own. The contrast forms a literary chiasmus: the elder brother, who has no apparent reason to repent, is furious with the father, while the younger brother – who has reason to repent, but doesn't formally do so – is the cause for celebration. As C. H. Dodd notes, there is a significant disparity in the father's delight at his son's return, and the "churlish attitude of the 'respectable' elder brother."<sup>64</sup> The father forgives the younger son without hesitation, and his compassion and forgiveness seem to have no limits. If the father's character metaphorically represents God, then divine compassion and forgiveness are seemingly unconditional according to Luke. Levine says it best: "[Compassion] indicates recognition that one who might be considered dead could become alive."<sup>65</sup> The dead/alive and lost/found rhetoric is at the root of compassion and forgiveness; and it is no coincidence that this disparity is a uniquely Lukan rhetorical device.

Luke's personal stance on repentance is definitely surprising in the parable. Although the Greek term used for 'prodigal' ('asotos') implies profligate behavior and hints at sexual access,<sup>66</sup> both of the sons are prodigals in their own ways. Neither the elder nor the younger son seems to love the father, and they are also equally incapable of

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<sup>63</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 93.

<sup>65</sup> Amy-Jill Levine. "A Parable and its Baggage: What the Prodigal Son Story Doesn't Mean," *The Christian Century*, August 25, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 73.

loving each other.<sup>67</sup> Even when the younger son decides to return home –in 15:17, “he came to himself”– there are still no explicit signs of contrition. In fact, Luke does not use the conventional Greek term for “repentance” with the younger son at all.<sup>68</sup> If the evangelist had wanted his audience to perceive the younger son as truly repentant, then he could have easily used the specific word for “repentance” that he employs twenty-five times in his Gospel-Acts.<sup>69</sup> That is not the case, however. In addition to the literary absence of “repentance,” the father (by extension, Luke) stops the younger son from completing what would have been the repentant aspect of the prepared apology. The younger son does not get to say what he prepares in 15:19, “treat me like one of your hired hands.” Although Karl Barth finds the doctrine of repentance in the parable –he claims the story is “a most illuminating parallel to the way trodden by Jesus Christ in the work of atonement, to His humiliation and exaltation”<sup>70</sup>– traditional notions of atonement are actually lacking in the narrative. Barth’s interpretation is foreign to the parable’s Second Temple Period context and therefore to Luke’s original intentions as well.

As a transition into *The Unjust Steward*, my last comment on *The Prodigal Son* is about another uniquely Lukan rhetorical device: interior monologue. When the parable’s characters –e.g. the younger son– have interior monologues, Luke is literally asserting his voice as an author into the text.<sup>71</sup> Like the dead/alive and lost/found imagery, these interior monologues only occur in Luke’s versions of the parables. In 15:17-19, Luke discloses the younger son’s motives, i.e., the reason behind his actions. Although they sometimes confuse rather than clarify, the interior monologues are Luke’s attempt to

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<sup>67</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 130.

<sup>68</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 76.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 76

<sup>70</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 130.

<sup>71</sup> Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost”: 744.

explain the more esoteric parts of the parables. By making the characters more transparent, however, Luke shows his hand as an author/editor. Turning now to *The Unjust Steward*, Garwood Anderson poses an important question: “Are these interior monologues owed to a Lucan source, a sign of Lucan redaction, or evidence that the evangelist created the parable?”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 744.

## The Unjust Steward

The parable of *The Unjust Steward* is perhaps the most difficult Lukan parable, and it receives the highest mark of authenticity from the Jesus Seminar:

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”<sup>73</sup>

Situated in Luke’s travel narrative (Lk. 9:51-19:27), *The Unjust Steward* is perplexing and easily misunderstood. Although the story touches on compassion and repentance, Luke’s broader message is about God’s unexpected (surprising!) forgiveness. For my purposes, however, Luke’s criticisms about the improper use of money—a Lukan theme treated in a distinctly Lukan manner—are perhaps even more significant. I believe that *The Unjust Steward*’s historical context is vital to understanding Luke’s assertions. Without the context, the parable’s ambiguous, esoteric elements are left to allegory; and to allegorize this story in particular is to misinterpret an essential part of Luke’s theology.

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<sup>73</sup> Lk. 16:1-13.

Even more so than *The Prodigal Son* or *The Good Samaritan*, *The Unjust Steward* epitomizes how Luke uses Jesus' parables to propagate his own particular theology.

As is the case with the other unique parables, *The Unjust Steward* would have shocked a first-century Jewish audience. Luke's audience at the time included various combinations of crowds, disciples, and religious leaders. In its original historical context as well as in modernity, the parable raises many questions. Is the master actually righteous, and is he a metaphor for God? Why does he praise a steward who is not only horribly inefficient, but also completely dishonest and unethical? Who are "the children of the light?"

The parable's characters—in particular, the master and his steward—and the plot defy common expectations (at least as reflected in many Jewish sources). Bradford Young is especially helpful in revealing the "rich Semitic imagery in a colorful setting,"<sup>74</sup> as well as the parable's specific criticisms. Since the characters are all literate, they are presumed to be elites—in the interior dialogue the steward himself says he is "ashamed to beg" (Lk. 16:3). So for a Jewish audience, the saying is a clever example of how "the elites carry on their business, while God's Torah gets accomplished in spite of their intentions."<sup>75</sup> Akin to the younger son in *The Prodigal Son*, the steward has squandered his master's "property."<sup>76</sup> The audience would anticipate an attempt on the behalf of the steward to keep his job, but no such attempt is made. He does not give the master an account of his management, but instead plans on how he will salvage some form of his elite status (evident again in the interior dialogue, "so that, when [he is] dismissed as manager, people may welcome [him] into their homes"). It is important to note that one

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<sup>74</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 235.

<sup>75</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 93.

<sup>76</sup> Lk. 16:1.

definition for wisdom in the Torah is “an instinct for self-preservation”<sup>77</sup> because the steward’s self-interest and self-preservation are essential in the parable. He knows that whatever he does he must do it quickly, since the debtors do not yet know that he has been fired. The steward faces a crisis that may ruin him, and he responds by acting boldly, selfishly, unethically, and behind his master’s back. And he is rewarded! Though punishment would be the logically expectation, the master commends the steward for acting the way that he did (though the master’s honor would have likely been blasphemed had he reneged on the steward’s seemingly benevolent acts). The plot is distinctly Lukan; Garwood Anderson notes, “The Lucan parables are stories of characters in crisis, whether of their own making or imposed from without.”<sup>78</sup> Like *The Prodigal Son*, the plot would have been unsettling to the audience. Both the steward and the audience are in a similar crisis: the steward is concerned with preserving his honor, and the audience, their salvation.<sup>79</sup>

The parable focuses on the master’s praise of the steward’s actions towards the debtors. Although the steward’s actions are fraudulent, his underlying prudence and wisdom is praiseworthy. Evident also with the sons in *the Prodigal Son*, Luke seems to skew more traditional notions of repentance in *The Unjust Steward*. There is no textual support for the steward’s repentance; in fact, the interior dialogue in 16:3-4 suggests quite the opposite. Both the interior dialogue and his savvy business decisions show that the steward is very clever in how he goes about preserving his honor, and there is no explicit indicator that he is remorseful for squandering his master’s property. The master’s praise is not contingent on the steward’s repentance; he is commended precisely because of his

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<sup>77</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 242.

<sup>78</sup> Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost”: 731.

<sup>79</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 17.

shrewdness. T.W. Manson notes the difference between “I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly,” and “I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly.”<sup>80</sup> Yet the situation in the narrative is still vexing. Imagine, for instance, if the parable stopped at 16:8. Without the literary volta in 16:9 –“and I tell you...” and the subsequent four verses, the parable is almost unbelievable! And even with the commentary in the final verses, *The Unjust Steward* is still incredibly difficult to understand. Luke ultimately equates the master’s praise with God’s forgiveness: it is undeserved and definitely unexpected. It is noteworthy that, in the broader context of his Gospel, Luke juxtaposes the steward’s praise with God’s reproach, “Fool!” in Lk. 12:20.<sup>81</sup> The master’s praise ultimately serves to progress Luke’s visions of divine compassion and forgiveness, and many scholars –such as F.G Dutton, F. Maass, John Coutts, and L.J Topel– maintain that forgiveness is the parable’s most significant lesson.<sup>82</sup> I agree with these academics, but I also believe that Luke’s personal claims about fiscal responsibility, though less apparent, are equally important in the parable.

At the literary level, *The Unjust Steward* is subtle in the way it espouses specifically Lukan views about money and its proper usages. Many scholars regard verses 9-13 as later additions to the original narrative, which is to say that these particular verses are Luke’s own commentary. In the closing lines, Luke appends a series of morals in which his literary voice becomes especially distinct and increasingly specific.<sup>83</sup> For example, the application in 16:10-12 resembles a *nimshal* (that is, an explanation of the parable/*mashal*). Even the Jesus Seminar recognizes that verses 10-13 are “clearly

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<sup>80</sup> Dennis J. Ireland, "Putting Things in Perspective: A History of Recent Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward," *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: Westminster Theological Journal* 51, (1989): 296.

<sup>81</sup> Hedrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 170.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 311.

<sup>83</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 17.

secondary products of later tradition.”<sup>84</sup> Yet regardless of whether or not the final verse – “You cannot serve God and wealth” – is the earliest historical application, it is evident that Luke is chiefly concerned with money. The evangelist uses two very exact (and curious) phrases in his commentary: “sons of light” and “unrighteous mammon.”<sup>85</sup> Young connects the historical context and notes how these specific terms likely refer to the Dead Sea Community, and more specifically, the Essenes:

The policy of the Essenes was to confiscate all the financial holdings and personal belongings of their members. The covenanters of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which the consensus of scholars tends to identify with the Essenes, referred to themselves as the ‘sons of light.’ Money belonging to those outside their community was deemed the ‘mammon of unrighteousness.’<sup>86</sup>

Throughout his gospel, Luke is insistent that money must be used to help people, and *The Unjust Steward* is the parable par excellence for his fiscal views. He opposes the communal wealth of the Essene community – a very specific issue that cannot be understood properly outside of its original, historical context. The Essenes (like the steward initially) take advantage of those within their community; they abuse financial roles, the power that comes with elite status, and monetary resources. The master praises the steward for acting shrewdly, for self-preserving, because the parable is a negative parody against the Essenes (via verse 8, “more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light”). The steward’s actions – though still unethical and unjust – are indeed legitimate to the master’s debtors. Even though the steward reduces the amounts that the debtors owe his master, each of the dealings are still relatively large amounts – roughly 500 denarii.<sup>87</sup> In terms of management, the steward’s

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<sup>84</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Translated as “dishonest wealth” in the NRSV.

<sup>86</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 233.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

shrewdness is commendable for the master; but whether or not this is an example of the steward's moral amelioration is controversial. Dennis Ireland, for example, explains how instead of "a falsification," the debt reductions are a "rectification of past wrongs. The new amounts on the bills and the amounts actually collected and passed on to the master finally agreed."<sup>88</sup> Scholars like D.R. Fletcher do not believe we can vindicate the steward's actions at all; he argues that the parable's most important feature is "a demand for faithfulness and obedience, particularly in the face of the corrosive influence of unrighteous mammon."<sup>89</sup> He interprets Luke's application (16:9-13) as an ironic taunt that teaches self-interest, and that self-interest doesn't match the general tenor of Jesus' teachings.<sup>90</sup> Are we to interpret the steward's shrewdness as a form of repentance? The answer is unclear. For my purposes, it is more interesting (and by no accident) that *The Unjust Steward* has a significant Lukan commentary appended to it. The author interprets the enigmatic parable, and the application is his personal theology as well as literary addenda to the original story.

I believe that for those who use this parable for pastoral purposes, there is a real danger in extrapolating broader claims from a story that is ultimately very precise. In other words, attempts to modernize this parable could be contradictory to Luke's original intentions. Since *The Unjust Steward's* characters are situated in a morally ambiguous situation—an almost ubiquitous feature in the Lukan parables—and one might turn to allegory for understanding. There is indeed a plethora of ways to allegorize the story; we can conceive of the master as Satan, or the steward as a falsely accused slave, and so on.

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<sup>88</sup> Ireland, "Putting Things in Perspective": 312.

<sup>89</sup> Donald R. Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82, no. 1 (1963): 29.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 24-25.

But Luke doesn't use the story's characters to "unfold images" or to transform the reader metaphorically; the parable's "meaning" is not inherent in "its metaphorical structure."<sup>91</sup> Once the historical context is made clear, Luke's criticism of the Essene community is specific, and allegorizing becomes simply false practice. Although "the children of the light" seems nominally ambiguous, Young's critical-historical theory is the most compelling interpretation: *The Unjust Steward* is Luke's personal condemnation of the Essene's financial practices. The parable needs to be understood in its original context; as Levine cautions, "That context should not be made to serve as an artificial and negative foil that makes Jesus look original or countercultural in cases where he is not."<sup>92</sup> Although allegorizing the story might render it easier to understand, there is no need to assign an unwarranted, incorrect interpretive method to this saying. The parable is not designed to comfort, or to be made into something that it is not. Levine's warning is not the only warning to consider regarding Luke's parables.

Vis-à-vis his gospel's opening lines, Luke explicitly notes that he has interpreted the significance of Jesus' earthly ministry. Beyond any doubt, and quite understandably, Luke's gospel is a subjective account of events. To this end, Luke sometimes besets Jesus' parables (like *The Unjust Steward*) with "interpretations and applications that many regard as patently artificial."<sup>93</sup> Where Anderson says "patently artificial," I would substitute "essential to Luke's personal theology," and this is consistent with my claim that the parables pose the opportune platform for the evangelists to make claims that will be perceived as authoritative. Furthermore, if we do attribute *The Unjust Steward* to the

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<sup>91</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?*, 85.

<sup>92</sup> Amy-Jill Levine. "A Parable and its Baggage: What the Prodigal Son Story Doesn't Mean," *The Christian Century*, August 25, 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Anderson, "Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost": 730.

historical Jesus, then from Jesus' mouth to those sitting in a Christian church, any one parable has received at least two formal reinterpretations –Luke's, and then a preacher's/priest's. In reality, however, these parables have received many forms of revision, subsequent interpretation, and then countless reinterpretations in both the oral tradition they arise out of and again through the written tradition (e.g., via Luke's Gospel). David Stern claims that many scholars recognize the evangelists' "extensive revision" of the parables, which serve to "revise the narratives and reinterpret their meanings to fit the needs of the early Church."<sup>94</sup> For Luke (and for Matthew), revision and reinterpretation are necessary processes for understanding Jesus' parables. If we wish to understand the parables within their own cultural contexts, then we must recognize the sorts of assumptions prevalent during Luke's time as well as his original intentions for his audience.

In other words, for the purposes of the early Christian tradition –a tradition heavily influenced by the preexisting Jewish oral tradition– Luke revises, edits, and interprets Jesus' parables. Like the parables of *The Unjust Steward*, *The Prodigal Son*, and *The Good Samaritan*, Luke's own theology is unique.

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<sup>94</sup> Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 189.

## Matthew's Parables

Though I am primarily interested in three of Matthew's unique parables, it is pertinent to note some more general features of the Matthean parables. One of the most significant implications, for instance, is that Matthew's Gospel and parables intend to expound on Mark's gospel and parables.<sup>95</sup> Matthew retains many of the Markan parables, but often changes them. His deliberate editorial efforts exemplify how the parables are able to progress an author's unique theology. Insofar as where Matthew derives his parables, it is evident that he honors the Markan tradition, and draws from Q and his own source M (Q's lesser authority allows for Matthew's literary creativity in some instances).<sup>96</sup> The M source accounts for at least nine parables in Matthew, and, as Meier argues, "A good number of the M parables evince what one might call a strong Matthean redactional tone, coloration, or theology."<sup>97</sup> Not surprisingly, *The Unmerciful Servant* and *The Laborers in the Vineyard* are M parables, *The Sheep and the Goats*' origins are ambiguous (if it is even a parable at all), and all three of the sayings are unique to Matthew's gospel.

Matthew's unique parables focus closely on the nature of the kingdom of heaven, and like Luke, Matthew sometimes redacts the parables to confront the problems of the early church. Since Matthew reinterprets Markan material, the relationship between Jesus' parables and the disciples is also significant in Matthew's parables. He reinterprets the Markan disciples' lack of understanding; for example, he omits Mk. 4:34b: "but privately to his disciples [Jesus] explained everything." As an editor,

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<sup>95</sup> M. D. Goulder, "Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 19, no. 1 (1968): 67.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>97</sup> Meier, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*, 195.

however, Matthew is able to rectify the deliberate omission: “Then [Jesus] left the crowds...and his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ [Jesus] answered...” (Matt. 13:36-43). As Dan Otto Via observes, the parables often keep ‘outsiders’ out, and give ‘more’ –that is, in terms of parable explanation– to those whom already have –i.e., the disciples.<sup>98</sup> In Matthew (and also in Mark), the parables can be viewed as “an implicitly esoteric mode of communication” that separates “insiders” from the “outsiders.”<sup>99</sup> In addition to the outsider/insider dichotomy, the good/evil distinction is especially important for Matthew’s eschatology. While the Markan parables require constant remedial instruction from Jesus to his disciples,<sup>100</sup> the Matthean parables implicitly ask for the audience/reader to go beyond the disciples and interpret the sayings in their own right.

To this end, Matthew’s parables sometimes contain allegorical content. Since his parables “conceal” language, in most cases their meaning is not readily apparent.<sup>101</sup> Many Matthean parables are initiated by the same literary formula: “The kingdom of heaven is like...” and therefore resemble similitudes; the phrase initiates the parables of *The Laborers in the Vineyard* and *The Unmerciful Servant*. These parables, along with *The Sheep and the Goats*, are my focus because they are grand-scale, hell-bound, kingdom-of-heaven parables about God’s grace, forgiveness, and Kingdom.

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<sup>98</sup> Dan Otto Via, "Matthew on the Understandability of the Parables," *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, no. 4 (1965): 432.

<sup>99</sup> Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Via, “Matthew on the Understandability of the Parables”: 430.

## The Unmerciful Servant

*The Unmerciful Servant* receives a pink mark from the Jesus Seminar; the narrative parable occurs in Matthew's didactically oriented Chapter 18:

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But the same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.<sup>102</sup>

As far as the literary context, *The Unmerciful Servant* concludes Matthew's ecclesiastical discourse.<sup>103</sup> The narrative proper begins with the Matthean Jesus' response to Peter's question in 18:21: "How often should I forgive?" Matthew provides the necessary introduction, but verse 22 may go back to Jesus according to the Jesus Seminar.<sup>104</sup> The parable contains literary and rhetorical elements that are indicative of Matthew's theology. The evangelist posits his personal conceptions of compassion, forgiveness, and the nature of the God's Kingdom (these tropes reoccur in his Gospel's unique parables). As far as the narrative's structure, *The Unmerciful Servant* consists of four parts: the initial king/slave dealing; the slave/fellow slave interaction; the king's

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<sup>102</sup> Mt. 18:23-35.

<sup>103</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 268.

<sup>104</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 49.

response to the slave's mercilessness; and then the final application. I am primarily concerned with the Matthean application, and the parts of the parable that demonstrate the author's unique theology. Concerning the narrative's origins, John Donahue notes that the parable "consists of material from Matthew's own tradition, M, or of his own composition."<sup>105</sup>

At the semantic level, the story's incipit –“For this reason”– acts as a formal transition into the Matthean Jesus' explanation to Peter's question. Notice that Peter did not ask about the kingdom of heaven; the text shows that he is chiefly concerned with the nature of forgiveness and its limits. The parable, however, begins with Matthew's distinct, kingdom-of-heaven formula and it appears to be the result of Matthew's editorial effort. In other words, the narrative would still function without the first half of verse 23, and Peter's question doesn't seem to warrant the comparison made in the opening line. Matthew gives primacy to the kingdom of heaven in the parable's opening lines because of his eschatological focus. Evident in his other unique parables as well, Matthew likely thought of “the kingdom of heaven” as an actual place, and his parables tend to increase violence (likely a reflection of Jerusalem's destruction, according to Levine).<sup>106</sup> The evangelist's proclivity for violence is demonstrated in verse 28: “seizing [the other slave] by the throat.” The narrative could still function without that detail, but the addition is characteristic of Matthew's literary style. The way that Matthew conceives of violence and money corresponds to his notions of forgiveness and compassion in the broader context of the kingdom of heaven. To this end, scholars like Norman Perrin suggest that the parable begins with the kingdom of heaven comparison because of the phrase's

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<sup>105</sup> Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 72.

<sup>106</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 15.

versatility in representing a vast range of conceptions.<sup>107</sup> The “kingdom of heaven” evokes many different soteriological conceptions, and *The Unmerciful Servant*’s content does the same. The distinctly Matthean opening initiates and allows for an allegorical interpretation and imagination.

More than any other synoptic author, Matthew loves the grand-scale. We see the largest amount of money in any Lukan parable in *The Unjust Steward*, and his greatest amount is “less than a quarter of Matthew’s smallest investment.”<sup>108</sup> The ten thousand talents that the servant owes the king is an astronomical amount. In the first century CE, one talent roughly equates to 6,000 denarii and a single denarius is often a common laborer’s daily wage.<sup>109</sup> The slave’s promise to repay the “debt” –the Greek term used usually signifies a “loan”<sup>110</sup>– is unreasonable and outlandish. Although Exodus 22:1 argues that a man could be sold to cancel a debt (“The thief shall make restitution, but if unable to do so, shall be sold for the theft”), it is unclear whether such a sale has legal grounds in Jewish law.<sup>111</sup> Essentially no “servant” –the translation of the Greek term “doulos”<sup>112</sup>– could pay off this debt, and therefore the request in verse 26 is simply a lie. John Dominic Crossan notes how the amount would have sounded absurd to Matthew’s original audience, and that the debt also demonstrates the extravagance of the plot.<sup>113</sup> In other words, the hyperbole is deliberate on Matthew’s part because the servant’s absurd debt ultimately magnifies the king’s actions.

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<sup>107</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?*, 86.

<sup>108</sup> Goulder, “Characteristics of the Parables”: 55.

<sup>109</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 23.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>111</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott. "The King's Accounting: Matthew 18:23-34," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 3 (1985): 436.

<sup>112</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 209.

<sup>113</sup> Crossan, John Dominic and Ben Witherington III. *The Message of Jesus* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2013), 40.

In an allegorical reading, the king is a metaphor for God. Matthean forgiveness and compassion are evident in the king's dealings with his servant, but the king—like Matthew's theology—is complicated. It is important to note that the character changes from “king” to “lord” in the narrative proper, and that his actions become difficult to reconcile as the story unfolds. The initial decision to forgive the servant's debt is shocking and incredibly merciful. At first, the king's forgiveness is consistent with the Matthean Jesus' response in 18: 22: forgive “not seven times” but “seventy-seven times”—i.e., forever and ever. The decision comes “out of pity for [the servant],” and the Greek term for “pity” is used “in reference to persons who reflect divine compassion.”<sup>114</sup> But the king—that is, God—does not repeatedly forgive his servant like Jesus prescribes. When the king hears about the interactions between the servant and the fellow slave (per verse 34), he angrily condemns his servant to torture. The lesson: since the servant received forgiveness, he should have likewise pardoned the other slave. According to the Matthew, then, forgiveness received is the basis for forgiveness given: human forgiveness appears to be a prerequisite for divine forgiveness. It seems that Matthew's king is ultimately “an inappropriate cipher for God.”<sup>115</sup> So what is the evangelist really saying to his audience?

Matthew's application in 18:35 —“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart”—reveals the evangelist's interpretation of the parable, and, as a consequence, his unique theological beliefs. The phrase “heavenly Father” is a key Matthean expression, and it is also part of the reason that the Jesus Seminar considers verse 35 as Matthew's addition and not Jesus'

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<sup>114</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 26.

<sup>115</sup> Scott, “The King's Accounting: Matthew 18:23-34”: 440.

own words.<sup>116</sup> The parable is a type of “blame-*mashal*” that is directed at those who are not compassionate or forgiving.<sup>117</sup> The application, then, is a particular subset of *nimshal*: an epimythium.<sup>118</sup> As a moral addendum, the epimythium presents a single point of comparison: since God has forgiven us, we must forgive each other. The servant should have forgave like the king did, but because he didn’t he will be punished until he repays the “entire” debt (the wording in 18:34 is nearly identical to 18:30, except “entire” is added). Since the amount of debt is so extreme, the implication is that the servant will suffer perennially. I believe the correct interpretation of the application is one that is consistent with Matthew’s eschatological visions because the author’s stances on the kingdom of heaven and hell are evident in the opening comparison and in the final application. In the context of his eschatology, the application contains an important Matthean focus: the heart. Although the Greek term for “heart” is not unique to Matthew’s gospel, it appears 18 times therein and seems to be tied to his specific notion of repentance.

To forgive from the heart is the antithesis of the servant’s (and the king’s) actions in the narrative. Clearly, *The Unmerciful Servant*’s king is unlike *The Prodigal Son*’s father and *The Unjust Steward*’s manager. Matthean forgiveness and repentance ultimately differ from the Lukan versions (vis-à-vis unique Lukan parables). Unlike *The Good Samaritan*, the chief message in *The Unmerciful Servant* is “don’t do likewise!”<sup>119</sup> Both evangelists use narratives that surprise their audiences; however, Matthew’s theological claims are predicated on his conceptions of God’s judgment. The

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<sup>116</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 49.

<sup>117</sup> Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 199.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 269.

evangelist's obsession with the final judgment causes some of his unique parables – especially *The Sheep and the Goats*– to be more dramatic than some of the other NT parables. In the grander scheme of Matthean eschatology, human-to-human forgiveness begins in the heart. As Raymond Belliotti notes, “A perpetrator’s repentance is a sufficient condition for the victim’s forgiveness.”<sup>120</sup> Peter’s question and Matthew’s application indicate that we must forgive even the recidivists! The actions in the narrative demonstrate what it means to forgive from the heart; and it is a dramatic, negative example of genuine forgiveness that is thoroughly Matthean.

*The Unmerciful Servant* still works as a “novellen” (i.e., a full-length tale)<sup>121</sup> without the opening formula and the final application. However, these editorial addenda are essential to Matthew because he is concerned about forgiveness in the broader context of Judgment Day. Unlike Luke’s, Matthew’s understanding of God’s forgiveness and mercy is not depicted as unconditional. His eschatological interpretation, in fact, aligns itself with predominantly Jewish sentiments: Sirach 28:1, for example, “The vengeful will face the Lord’s vengeance, for he keeps a strict account of their sins.” Luke’s father and manager also represent God, but his unique parables do not outline such a detailed eschatology as Matthew’s characters do. Unlike the younger son in *The Prodigal Son*, the Matthean sinners are judged severely and condemned if they do not genuinely forgive others. *The Unmerciful Servant* ultimately contains “an uncommonly high proportion of Matthean words and phrases,” and its hyperbole, king-imagery, and emphasis on forgiveness/judgment are also characteristic of Matthew’s theology.<sup>122</sup> Matthew’s

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<sup>120</sup> Raymond A. Belliotti, *Jesus the Radical: the Parables and Modern Morality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 86.

<sup>121</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 7.

<sup>122</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 29.

editorial efforts are obvious, and (like *The Good Samaritan*) the parable is frank in how it establishes both his theology and writing style. Like the Jesus Seminar, I believe that *The Unmerciful Servant* is consistent with the historical Jesus' messages: they conclude, "The Unmerciful Servant exhibits marks of both oral tradition and exaggerations typical of Jesus' stories."<sup>123</sup> I do not think the parable posits Matthew's more contentious and personal religious claims. The story is unique to Matthew, but it does not necessarily contradict the other evangelists' religious stances. In other words, the mode of communication is distinctly Matthean, but the message is by no means incongruous with that of the other synoptic authors. The same cannot be said about *The Sheep and the Goats*.

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<sup>123</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 49.

## The Sheep and the Goats

We turn now to a parable whose authenticity wasn't formally voted on by the Jesus Seminar. Radically different from any other synoptic parable, *The Sheep and the Goats* posits Matthew's apocalyptic vision in –as B.B. Scott says– “a world of unending violence.”<sup>124</sup> The response-parable is unique both to Matthew's gospel and to his overall eschatological stance:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then we will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away unto eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.<sup>125</sup>

In its broader context, the pericope precedes Jesus' passion, and brings Matthew's apocalyptic and eschatological discourse to a close. Like *The Unmerciful Servant*, *The Sheep and the Goats* is addressed only to the disciples, and it follows the parables of *The Ten Bridesmaids* and *The Talents* (Matt. 25:1-30). Although there is contemporary

<sup>124</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 132

<sup>125</sup> Matt. 25:31-46

debate about whether the saying constitutes a parable,<sup>126</sup> I argue that my definition includes it as such. *The Sheep and the Goats* is hortatory in function, and it also contains certain parable-like features (in terms of literary structure and content). More importantly, the saying is exceptionally strange and remarkably Matthean. There is no imagination required from the reader, and the evangelist vividly depicts a grand scene of judgment in which good and evil are definitively separated. The narrative posits Matthew's final remarks about God's kingdom, God's judgment, and his ideas about compassion. The Matthean themes and style, as well as the intertwining of the narrative with the author's interpretation, all suggest that the parable is likely Matthew's creation.<sup>127</sup> I believe that *The Sheep and the Goats* is absolutely essential to Matthew's theological agenda, but the problem is why would he conclude his most pivotal teachings with a bizarre story that has no parallels in any other gospel?

*The Sheep and the Goats'* significance to Matthew's theology is evident in the evangelist's specific language. For scholars like M.D. Goulder, the parable gives too much exposition: he says, "In twenty parables [Matthew] can be convicted only once with certainty of spoiling the story for the meaning."<sup>128</sup> In addition to Matthew's literary "spoiling," the story is a present/future-tense narrative, not a traditional saying told in the past tense. Since *The Sheep and the Goats* focuses on the (near?) eschatological future, perhaps Matthew's use of the future tense is made to anticipate God's future judgment. Even before the parable's content and message, however, it is evident that the literary structure is a unique one. The narrative –like *The Good Samaritan*, for instance– is a

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<sup>126</sup> Lamar Cope, "Matthew XXV: 31-46: "The Sheep and the Goats" Reinterpreted," *Novum Testamentum* no. 11 (1969): 32.

<sup>127</sup> David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (The Jesus Library, IntVarsity Press 1989), 88.

<sup>128</sup> Goulder, "Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels": 60.

response-parable in a definite sense. Madeline Boucher says the response-parable is “a story; this story conveys a lesson, so that the parable has a double meaning, the story and the lesson; the parable’s purpose is to effect a change in the hearer.”<sup>129</sup> According to *The Sheep and the Goats*, the severity and decisiveness of the final judgment is an incentive for good works in the present life. The parable’s “story” and Matthew’s “lesson” are one in the same: act like the sheep, not like the goats. The ethical lesson in the scene of judgment is clear; as Donahue says, “Matthew’s parables are heavily ethical...but an ethics that is eschatologically determined.”<sup>130</sup>

In recent history, a common approach to parables is one that is edifying and moralizing.<sup>131</sup> Like other synoptic parables, *The Sheep and the Goats* insists on a form of moral amelioration. The avocation for proper, compassionate actions is seen throughout Matthew’s Gospel, and his notion of good works is depicted specifically in the story’s verbs. Using the actantial narrative schema, there are six actions in the story that serve to alleviate unfortunate conditions (e.g., in 25:35-36, “gave me food,” “gave me something to drink,” “welcomed me,” “gave me clothing,” “took care of me,” and “visited me”). Matthew’s editorial effort is evident in the verbs’ symmetrical parallelism; there are two items in each of the three groups, and all of these merciful actions arise from compassion. The actions ultimately demonstrate the typical, Matthean insistence on God’s judgment. The sheep personify Matthew’s idea of righteous works, while the goats’ lack of action condemns them to an eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46). In many Matthean parables, the author’s interpretation looks forward to the final fulfillment, and the fulfillment is usually

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<sup>129</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?*, 93.

<sup>130</sup> Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 200.

<sup>131</sup> Hedrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 249.

accompanied by judgment.<sup>132</sup> In this regard, *The Sheep and the Goats* is consistent with Matthew's eschatological stance, since it is a story of "existential challenge and eschatological crisis in the approved manner."<sup>133</sup>

But the king's judgment shocks the sheep and the goats equally! The righteous on the right as well as the "accursed" on the left both ask the king "when was it" that Jesus was hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, and in prison (Matt. 25:37, 25:44). The implication is that Jesus is somehow hidden in, and identifies with, the lives of the unfortunate. In the text, Jesus is unknown to the righteous and the sinners alike. Matthew's notion of righteousness, then, is characterized (at least partially) by merciful and compassionate actions. The verbs are indicative of Matthew's soteriological vision since to be separated is to be either damned or saved. Regardless of the "left" or "right" positions, the final separation is unequivocally decisive (Matt. 25:33). Both the sheep and the goats metaphorically represent the evangelist's understanding of God's final judgment—a reoccurring theme that is vital to Matthean theology. It is interesting that "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" does not seem to be a location made for humans; it is a very unnatural place in the parable (Matt. 25:41). As a continuation of Matthew's eschatological lessons, God's separation between good and evil—i.e., between sheep and goats—is indeed final.

As apocalyptic revelation, *The Sheep and the Goats* contains many distinctly Matthean words and phrases. In both 25:40 and 25:45, for instance, the Matthean Jesus repeats, "one of the least of these." Matthew uses the clause in 5:19 as well, but he is the only evangelist to attribute this particular phrase to Jesus. Although the opening verse

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>133</sup> Goulder, "Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels": 63.

has parallels in Mark 8:38, the idea that “the Son of Man will sit on the throne” is also unique to Matthew’s story . Donahue maintains that even without Matthew’s literary emphasis on “all the nations” (25:32) and “tote [then]” (25:37), the evangelist’s use of “throne of glory” indicates “considerable Matthean composition.”<sup>134</sup> It is also significant that the Greek for “by my father” in 25:35 occurs only 4 times in Luke’s gospel, never in Mark’s, but 16 times in Matthew’s. Furthermore, the latter part of 25:34 –“from the foundation of the world”– is uniquely Matthean; and, in 25:37, the Greek for “the righteous” is also the author’s own word.<sup>135</sup> The aggregation of these specific instances suggests that Matthew either completely constructed or (at least) significantly altered *The Sheep and the Goats*. Since the saying is difficult to trace back to the historical Jesus, why would Matthew use the parable to end his crucial, soteriological teachings?

Historically speaking, Matthew’s church consists of both Jews and Gentiles, and hence his conception of God’s judgment is also universal. Although the phrase “all the nations” has been translated many different ways, Hultgren is correct to note that the Greek term used for “all” often includes Gentiles in Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>136</sup> The metaphorical separation of the sheep and the goats in verses 32-33 is likened to the king’s judgment of “all the nations,” to God’s eventual judgment of Matthew’s audience. Some scholars maintain that, in comparison to other synoptic parables, the story’s simile is one of its only definitive, parabolic elements.<sup>137</sup> I do not believe this is the case. Simile in parables, Robert Funk argues, is an extended metaphor –“a bearer of the reality to which

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<sup>134</sup> Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 114.

<sup>135</sup> Cope, “The Sheep and the Goats Reinterpreted”: 38.

<sup>136</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 313.

<sup>137</sup> Cope, “The Sheep and the Goats Reinterpreted”: 34.

it refers”<sup>138</sup>— not an extended comparison. The distinction is important for *The Sheep and the Goats*’ metaphorical structure because of how highly allegorical the simile is. For John Dominic Crossan, allegory “expresses the intelligible” and symbols “express the inexpressible” and therefore parables (unlike allegory) are “metaphoric language that cannot be paraphrased in conceptual terms.”<sup>139</sup> It is important to recognize that, at times, a metaphor is able to create “a ‘void’ of meaning that generates the free play of interpretations.”<sup>140</sup> However, Matthew’s intention is that the parable elicits a particular response from his audience: the evangelist wants his listeners to act with compassion. So understood allegorically (not metaphorically), the simile progresses his notions of the “reality” of the kingdom of heaven, a place he considers “intelligible.” The unique story, then, is thoroughly Matthean and is Christianized in a way that lends itself to allegory, especially when the allegorical understanding corresponds with Matthew’s larger theological claims (e.g., eschatological discourse).

For these reasons, and along with the other strange literary facets, some scholars – like those in the Jesus Seminar- believe that *The Sheep and the Goats* should not be considered a parable at all. Joachim Jeremias, however, argues that the saying is a *meshal* in the sense of figurative speech; and I maintain that *The Sheep and the Goats* is too didactically oriented and too consistent with Matthew’s overall theology to be discounted as a parable.<sup>141</sup> The story is a Matthean-style parable that should be examined and scrutinized for its rich eschatological claims –not for historical authenticity.

Although Amy-Jill Levine does attribute the story to Jesus, she also notes, “The parable

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<sup>138</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* 19.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>141</sup> Joachim Jeremias. *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 206.

runs contrary to church's (later) focus that it is belief in Jesus...that conveys eschatological blessing."<sup>142</sup> Authenticity aside, Levine's comment recognizes the story's soteriological-oriented thrust. In the same vein, John P. Meier—a scholar who doesn't believe that the historical Jesus uttered the pericope—says the parable is “the reality to which all the parables and similitudes in Matthew's eschatological discourse point.”<sup>143</sup> Egon Brandenburger argues that the Matthean-form of the story “grew out of mission theology of early Jewish Christianity,” and contains too many distinctly Matthean elements to trace back to the historical Jesus.<sup>144</sup>

In other words, *The Sheep and the Goats* is the culmination of Matthew's (not necessarily Jesus') teachings about the kingdom of heaven; hence it is essential to the evangelist's theology and therefore included in his Gospel. I believe—as do C.H. Dodd and M.D. Goulder—that Matthew develops the parable beyond recognition and attribution to Jesus.<sup>145</sup> It is quite possible that the parable's uniqueness and strangeness was enough for the Jesus Seminar to decide not to vote on it. For my purposes, however, the parable is a poignant example of how Matthew uses the authority of Jesus to give credence to the evangelist's own religious claims. Regardless of authenticity, the apocalyptic prediction is essential to Matthew's theological agenda.

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<sup>142</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 12.

<sup>143</sup> Meier, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*, 215.

<sup>144</sup> Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 113.

<sup>145</sup> Goulder, “Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels”: 68.

## The Laborers in the Vineyard

The final unique parable to examine is *The Laborers in the Vineyard*. The Jesus Seminar's overall vote was red (i.e., the story is likely to be authentic to the historical Jesus).<sup>146</sup> The parable includes literary and thematic aspects that are characteristic of Matthean authorship and theology:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.<sup>147</sup>

In terms of literary genre, *The Laborers in the Vineyard* is a unique narrative parable in Matthew. This species of parable is widespread in both Luke's and Matthew's gospels, but notably absent in the rest of the New Testament. Narrative parables often differ from similitudes; that is, "parables in which the comparison 'like' is expressed."<sup>148</sup> Yet, *The Laborers in the Vineyard* does make a single comparison in the opening line: "the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out in the early morning to hire

<sup>146</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 98.

<sup>147</sup> Matt. 20:1-16.

<sup>148</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 17.

laborers for his vineyard” (Matt. 20:1). Evident also in *The Unmerciful Servant*, the Matthean formula introduces most of the parables in Chapter 13; see Matt. 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47. The incipit serves to orient Matthew’s readers; as C.H. Dodd says, “All the details [are] designed to set the situation or series of events in the clearest possible light, so as to catch the imagination.”<sup>149</sup> In addition to the kingdom-of-heaven comparison, the opening verse also gives the parable’s setting: a vineyard. The vineyard is a common metaphorical symbol for Israel; therefore it is especially noteworthy that the parable is only addressed to the disciples in the Gospel, instead of Matthew’s larger, Second-Temple, Jewish audience.<sup>150</sup> The Matthean Jesus’ focus on properly instructing his disciples is a re-appropriated Markan concept that Matthew incorporates into the narrative.

In regards to his theology, Matthew uses *The Laborers in the Vineyard* to instill his personal notions of God’s grace and generosity. The narrative’s protagonist is the landowner: a metaphorical representation of God. The landowner personifies divine generosity. He reflects God’s grace, a grace that transcends normative, human expectations. However, some scholars do not interpret the landowner’s character as gracious at all. For example, William R. Herzog argues that the landowner’s use of “friend” in verse 13 is actually sarcastic; Herzog focuses on the parable’s final dialogue, in which the landowner chooses the leader of the first group of workers, and mocks him publically.<sup>151</sup> Given his socio-economic status, the landowner’s remark in 20:15 is interpreted facetiously as well, “am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs

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<sup>149</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 7.

<sup>150</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 198.

<sup>151</sup> Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables: Jesus and His Modern Critics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press 2004), 43.

to me?” Many academics, however, do not agree with Herzog’s exegesis. Robert Funk says that parable’s ending is “upsetting and disturbing” which “is characteristic of the parables of Jesus.”<sup>152</sup> Similarly, C.H. Dodd finds that *The Laborers in the Vineyard* is “a striking picture of divine generosity which gives without regard to the measures of strict justice.”<sup>153</sup> I concur with Funk and Dodd’s claims, and I believe Herzog –although brilliant!– places too much of an emphasis on his own socio-historical hermeneutic. More importantly: if the landowner epitomizes “divine generosity,” then Matthew’s conception of God’s grace is unique and nuanced.

The crux of *The Laborers in the Vineyard* is the landowner’s dealings with his workers. The laborers’ financial compensations are surprising, and indicative of Matthean generosity. To start, there is a large discrepancy in the hours worked amongst the workers: the first hired laborers work for 12 hours; the second hired, 9; the third hired, 6; the penultimate group, 3; and the last hired only worked 1 hour.<sup>154</sup> Regardless of the hours worked, all of the laborers are paid the same amount: “the usual daily wage” (Matt. 20:9). According to Hultgren, in the first century CE a denarius is adequate pay for a day’s work, it is neither “generous nor miserly.”<sup>155</sup> Levine also notes that a laborer’s daily wage is fair: the amount would supply the average family with about three to six days of food.<sup>156</sup> Although Matthew’s love for the grandiose is readily apparent in his other unique parables, financial extravagance is not evident in the worker’s salary.

The landowner claims that the first group of laborers agreed for the usual daily wage (via 20:13) and likewise he says he will pay the second group “whatever is right”

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<sup>152</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 33.

<sup>153</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 94-95.

<sup>154</sup> Belliotti, *Jesus the Radical*, 60.

<sup>155</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 36.

<sup>156</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 207.

(Matt. 20:4). In 20:12, the first group reminds the landowner that they “have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat,” and therefore believe that they should receive a larger reward than those who worked only an hour or a few hours. The problem: there is a stark contrast between the first group and the last group in terms of hours worked, but both groups are paid equally. As B.B. Scott says, “The laborers’ essential complaint is that the master has destroyed the order of the world.”<sup>157</sup> In terms of fair pay, the workers who labored for only an hour should not be paid the same as those who worked all day! Is it fair to give a single denarius fair, or, as the landowner says, “right” for an hour of work?

The landowner’s decision questions “the ordinary, expected payment to labor, i.e., labor’s contribution to profit”<sup>158</sup> and this is precisely why it metaphorically reflects God’s generosity. Matthew’s landowner graciously chooses to pay the last group a full day’s wage, but he also fulfills his monetary promise to the first group (i.e., the usual daily wage). Notice in 20:12 that the first group laborer says, “[the landowner has] made them equal” to the last group. To the laborer, to be paid equally is to be “made equal,” and he sees no equality between the different groups of laborers. While the first group is in the marketplace “early in the morning,” the last group stands “idle” for nearly the entire workday (Matt. 20:1; 20:6). In addition to the number of hours worked, there seems to be a significant difference in the kinds of workers: the first group is ready to work all day, but the last group seems content in “standing around” the marketplace. Contrary to modern conceptions, however, the Greek word for “idle” in 20:6 does not signify lazy. The term simply means “without work” or “unemployed,” and it does not have negative

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<sup>157</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 132.

<sup>158</sup> Primeaux, Patrick, and Frank P. Le Veness. “What Is Fair: Three Perspectives,” *Journal of Business Ethics* no. 84 (2009): 89.

connotations.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, the last hired laborers are simply victims of bad luck –via 20:7, “no one has hired [them].” The landowner’s financial dealings serve to rectify their misfortune. Although Herzog finds sarcasm in the landowner’s remarks, the real irony is that the first group feels that they have been cheated when they haven’t been cheated at all. In the final dialogue (Matt. 20:13-15), the landowner asks, “Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage...am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” The rhetorical questions suggest that the laborers –i.e., Matthew’s audience– do not understand the nature and extent of God’s generosity. According to the parable, God’s grace cannot be measured by human standards. Matthew essentially asks his audience to expand their conceptions of God’s grace; the landowner’s fiscal decisions seem unjust precisely because divine generosity has no parity with human generosity.

Immediately after the landowner’s questions, Matthew adds his interpretation of *The Laborers in the Vineyard*. The narrative proper ends in 20:15, and I consider the application in verse 16 as the evangelist’s own addendum. The final verse is an aphorism, and it is the only section of the parable that the Jesus Seminar didn’t consider to be ‘likely’ authentic to the historical Jesus.<sup>160</sup> The epimythium –“So the last will be first, and the first will be last”– is also found in Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30 and is therefore not exclusive to Matthew’s gospel. Dan Otto Via maintains that the epimythium (which also occurs in Matt. 19:30) is the author’s own interpretation of the parable because the reversal motif “does not really get at the meaning of the parable.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 38.

<sup>160</sup> Funk, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*, 4.

<sup>161</sup> Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables*, 80.

To this end, William Herzog –along with other scholars– completely omits verse 16 from his exegesis.<sup>162</sup>

Regardless of authenticity, it is more significant that Matthew expounds upon this Markan material in his own unique way.<sup>163</sup> Although the aphorism seems out of place in regards to *The Laborer in the Vineyard*'s content and context, verse 16 is essential to Matthew's focus on God's generosity and grace because the phrase's use is distinctly Matthean. To illustrate this point, we must consider Mark's usage of the aphorism. When the Markan Jesus says, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first," it is appropriate because it concludes Jesus' diatribe about how difficult it is "for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk. 10:31; 10:25). In Mark's version, the metaphor is simple and apt: the rich in this world are likened to the "first," and the poor are the "last." The saying is sensible in its original Markan context, and it is also applicable in Matthew's reproduction of the Markan story in Matt. 19:16-30. Yet, in *The Laborers in the Vineyard*, Matthew seems to force the aphorism into the narrative. The interpretation seems especially unfitting since Matthew promptly returns to Mark's gospel's literary structure after verse 16. Directly following his use of the aphorism, Mark narrates, "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem" (Mk. 10:32). Similarly, immediately after Matthew's usage, Matt. 20:17 begins, "While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem." The comparison reveals Matthew's editorial efforts, and shows that the evangelist is acutely aware of incorporating the phrase into the parable. But why?

The epimythium ultimately serves to reestablish Matthew's eschatological orientation, and the prominence of these teachings. In *The Laborers in the Vineyard*, *The*

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>163</sup> Goulder, "Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels": 67.

*Sheep and the Goats*, and *The Unmerciful Servant*, Matthew's lessons concern the nature of the kingdom of heaven. We shouldn't separate Matthew's eschatological approach from his unique parables because their primary aim is to instruct the audience about God's kingdom and judgment. Therefore, through his interpretation in verse 16, Matthew is able to re-invoke the comparison that he establishes in the parable's first verse: "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Matthew's application reminds his audience that *The Laborers in the Vineyard* is really about the final judgment and the kingdom of heaven. God's grace and generosity, then, are thematic corollaries in Matthew's grander, eschatologically-bent theology. The evangelist uses the aphorism in 20:16 – "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" – as a way to interpret the nature of God's kingdom. Both Matthew's pen and personal interpretation are unequivocally evident in *The Laborers in the Vineyard's* final verse.

## Conclusion

The unique parables ultimately pose a unique challenge to interpreters. I have reached only three definitive conclusions.

First, if we are able to apply a healthy skepticism (in terms of historical authenticity to Jesus) to some of the unique parables, then we should apply the same practical suspicion to all of the synoptic parables. Although I did not examine Markan parables (and deliberately omitted the beastly task presented in Thomas' parables<sup>164</sup>), the fact that some of these sayings may not be authentically traced back to the historical Jesus suggests that all of them probably warrant the same scrutiny. I agree with C.H. Dodd that "the evangelists use a certain freedom in applying parables" because this liberty is evident in the parables I examine, at least in part due to the fact that they are unique to either Luke or Matthew.<sup>165</sup> As Crossan and Donahue both argue, part of the issue is that some parables (or "individual pericopes") profess different theological claims than those of an entire gospel taken as a whole.<sup>166</sup> Jesus' death and resurrection is at the heart of Christianity; but as B.B. Scott notes, the parables do not explain at all why Jesus was crucified.<sup>167</sup> In the same vein, it is important to note that many of the parables are by no means limited to the earliest and (supposedly) most reliable sources.<sup>168</sup> I find that one useful way to rationalize the parables is to think of them as a simple part of speech. In other words, to conceptualize them as "the smallest communicative unit, in

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<sup>164</sup> The Gospel of Thomas contains 114 sayings and parables, but lacks a narrative framework. It was probably composed between 50-60 CE. My original draft included exegesis on Thomas' logion 97 and logion 98, and both sayings receive a 'pink' authenticity rating from the Jesus Seminar (see Parable Catalog).

<sup>165</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 19.

<sup>166</sup> Crossan, *The Message of Jesus*, 21; Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 196.

<sup>167</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 5.

<sup>168</sup> Meier, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*, 195.

which a relationship is established among the speaker, the audience, the subject matter, and an action.”<sup>169</sup> The “relationship” between Matthew/Luke and the first Christians –i.e., the evangelists’ audience– cannot be understated because it demonstrates the communal aspect of parables, and also helps explain why a particular story would be included in a particular gospel.

Second, I conclude that the parables –in their more general sense– cannot be reduced for pastoral convenience. Although I understand that the allegorical and metaphorical nature in some of the sayings lends itself to a wide range of interpretation, Christian-church leaders should not make a parable (or any Scripture) into something that it isn’t. In my own religious experience, I find that parables are often times pejoratively simplified in order to comfort people. But the purpose of these stories is to elicit the opposite response. As Hultgren says, “It is important to recognize that parables do not always speak of what is typical in normal life (contrary to a lot of popular thinking about the parables).”<sup>170</sup> That is to say, *The Unjust Steward* is not a story about capitalism, and *The Laborers in the Vineyard* doesn’t point towards Worker Unions! There are few parallels between modern Western Culture and that of the first-century, Second Temple context in which the parables were constructed. To this end, Gowler makes a poignant observation: “We do not have to anachronize Jesus’ parables to make them relevant. The challenge is to modernize them authentically.”<sup>171</sup> While there are general, sweeping statements such as “you shall not murder” and “love your enemies,” the stories primarily

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<sup>169</sup> Thoma, Clemens, and Michael Wyschogrod, "The Function of Figurative Speech," 140.

<sup>170</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 42.

<sup>171</sup> Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?*, 84.

teach through challenge.<sup>172</sup> Can we act like the Samaritan in *The Good Samaritan*? Can we truly forgive, unlike the Unmerciful Servant's king?

Third, and perhaps most importantly, I do not believe there will ever be Christian solidarity regarding how to interpret the parables. Part of the reason there will never be unanimity is because, for many people, these stories are so enigmatic and so important. These stories matter; and I have come to realize that it is difficult to say anything novel about the parables since many intellectuals have dedicated their entire scholastic careers to just a few of Jesus' sayings! The question still (and likely always will) remains: How important is the historical Jesus when we examine the New Testament parables? Throughout the paper, I argue that a parable's historical and literary setting is crucial. The first-century cultural contexts in which the parables were first heard need to be taken into account when we examine Jesus' sayings. Concerning the unique parables, however, I do not think it really matters whether or not we can legitimately trace the unique parables back to the historical Jesus. Regardless if Jesus uttered the story or not, the parables have had a significant impact on Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy; and since the evangelists are an essential part of the Christian tradition and faith, there is no viable reason to dismiss a unique parable on the grounds that Jesus may not have said it. The crux of my thesis is that most parables existed prior to their formal incorporation into a Gospel,<sup>173</sup> and we should understand that Matthew and Luke use particular stories to promote their own theological agendas. Regarding the historical Jesus, however, John P. Meier says it best:

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<sup>172</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 12.

<sup>173</sup> Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*, 5.

Jesus does not go to the trouble of formulating and telling parables to his disciples and to the crowds simply to dazzle them with his verbal dexterity and then let them make of the parables whatever they will.<sup>174</sup>

The parables ultimately cause the audience to engage more closely with the speaker –be it Jesus, Matthew, or Luke- and also with the stories themselves. The unique parables in particular need to be understood in their original context, and I believe that observing Lukan and Matthean authorship and intention is a crucial part of this context. Returning to an excerpt from my Introduction, I would slightly abridge Levine’s warning –“If we get the context wrong, we’ll get Jesus wrong as well”<sup>175</sup>– by substituting “Jesus” with “Matthew and Luke.” I believe that when we engage with these stories we must recognize that we are encountering the Matthean or the Lukan forms of Jesus. To ignore this fact is to misinterpret the parables.

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<sup>174</sup> Meier, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*, 34.

<sup>175</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 9.

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## Parable Catalog

### Legend

“\*” indicates the parable is unique to that Gospel.

-The colors indicate the level of validity that the Jesus Seminar has given that particular parable.

“+” indicates the color black (i.e., Jesus probably did not say this parable).

“~” indicates the parable is not formally recognized by the Jesus Seminar

### Markan Parables and their Parallels

~Parable of **New Wine into Old Wineskins**

Mark 2:21-22

Matthew 9:17

Luke 5:37-39

~Parable of **the Strong Man**

Mark 3:27

Matthew 12:29

Luke 11:21-22

Parable of **the Sower**

Mark 4:1-20

Matthew 13:2-23

Luke 8:5-15

Thomas 9

~Parable of **the Lamp under a Bushel**

Mark 4:21-25

Matthew 13:3-9

Luke 8:16-18

\*Parable of the **Seed Growing Secretly**

Mark 4:26-29

Parable of the **Mustard Seed**

Mark 4:30-32

Matthew 13:31-32

Luke 13:18-19

Thomas 20

Parable of the **Tenants (Wicked Husbandmen)**

Mark 12:1-11

Matthew 21:33-46

Luke 20:9-18

Thomas 65

Parable of **the Budding Fig Tree**

Mark 13:28-32

Matthew 24:32-36

Luke 21:29-33

**Parable of the Faithful Servant**

Mark 13:33-37

Matthew 24:42

Luke 12:35-48

Thomas 21/103

**Matthean Parables (not found in Mark) and their Parallels****~Parable of the Wise and the Foolish Builders**

Matthew 7:24-27

Luke 6:46-49

**Parable of the Wheat and Tares**

Matthew 13:24-30

Thomas 57

**Parable of the Leaven**

Matthew 13:33

Luke 13:20-21

Thomas 96

**Parable of the Hidden Treasure**

Matthew 13:44

Thomas 109

**Parable of the Pearl**

Matthew 13:45-46

Thomas 76

**Parable of the Net**

Matthew 13:47-50

Thomas 8

**Parable of the Lost Sheep**

Matthew 18:12-14

Luke 15:3-7

Thomas 107

**\*Parable of the Unmerciful Servant**

Matthew 18:23-35

**\*Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard**

Matthew 20:1-16

**\*Parable of the Two Sons**

Matthew 21:28-31

**Parable of the Wedding Feast/Banquet**

Matthew 22:1-14

Luke 14:15-24

Thomas 64

**\*Parable of the Ten Virgins**

Matthew 25:1-12

\*Parable of **the Talents**

Matthew 25:14-25:30      Luke 19:13, 15-24

\*~Parable of **the Sheep and the Goats**

Matthew 25:31-46

**Lukan Parables (not found in Mark or Matthew) and their Parallels**

\*Parable of **the Barren Fig Tree**

Luke 13:6-9

\*Parable of **the Two Debtors**

Luke 10:30-37

\*Parable of **the Good Samaritan**

Luke 10:30-37

\*Parable of **the Friend at Night**

Luke 11:5-8

Parable of **the Rich Fool**

Luke 12:16-21      Thomas 63

\*Parable of **Counting the Cost**

Luke 14:28-33

\*Parable of **the Wedding Feast**

Luke 14:7-14

\*Parable of **the Lost Coin**

Luke 15:8-10

\*Parable of **the Prodigal Son**

Luke 15:11-32

\*Parable of **the Unjust Steward**

Luke 16:1-8

\*Parable of **the Rich Man and the Beggar Lazarus**

Luke 16:19-31

\*Parable of **the Master and the Servant**

Luke 17:7-10

\*Parable of **the Unjust Judge**

Luke 18:1-8

\*Parable of **the Pharisees and the Publican**

Luke 18:9-14

### **Parables in the Gospel of Thomas (without parallels)**

Parable of **the Children in the Field**

Thomas 21

Parable of **the Woman with the Jar of Meal**

Thomas 97

Parable of **Slaying the Powerful with a Sword (The Assassin)**

Thomas 98 –see also Thomas 35